

Perception of Collaboration between Parents and Teachers of Students with Special Needs Regarding the Individual Education Plan (IEP)

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Abstract: To best support students with special needs in their educational endeavors, research shows collaboration between the school and home greatly increases success, yet there is a gap in the literature that generalizes this concept, as most studies focus on one particular school or demographic group of students, such as those with autism. This qualitative study utilized convenience sampling and interviewed 10 parents of children with special needs and 10 teachers of students with special needs - all located throughout the United States - to get their perceptions of collaboration regarding the Individualized Education Program (IEP). Online interviews were conducted using Zoom ® and NVivo ® software was used in the data analysis process. Key terms used to identify themes included collaboration, equal partner, heard, listened to, supported, and IEP. Based on parent and teacher feedback, the data shows teachers have a higher perception of successful collaboration, but additional needs for educational training on the IEP, as well as on collaboration, for both parents and teachers is needed and desired. The implications of this study can assist other countries to either replicate or use this study for future literature review. The results can also be used to develop educational training for parents and teachers respectively based on the analysis.

Keyword: special education, Individualized Education Program (IEP), collaboration, partner, parental involvement, decision-making

INTRODUCTION

When students with disabilities are enrolled in school settings, there are often accommodations or modifications that need to be made to best meet the needs of the student to ensure an appropriate educational experience. In order to do this most effectively, many countries, including the United States, use an Individualized Education Program (IEP) to set goals for the student, outline targets and objectives, and detail how the student will meet these goals. Collaboration between parents and educational professionals is usually considered crucial to the development of an IEP that meets the educational needs of a child with disabilities. Such collaboration, however, can often be challenging in both U.S. and non-U.S. cultures.

This study looked at the perception of collaboration between parents and teachers of students with special needs in the United States, with a focus on the IEP, through personal interviews with participants representing each targeted demographic. According to Cook and Friend (2010), collaboration is “a style professionals select to employ based on mutual goals; parity; shared responsibility for key decisions; shared accountability for outcomes; shared resources; and the development of trust, respect, and a sense of community” (p. 3). Cook and Friend (2010) extend the definition, highlighting that “Interpersonal collaboration is a style of direct interaction between at least two co-equal parties voluntarily engaged in shared decision-making as they work toward a common goal” (p. 422). It is important to note that IEPs are intended to be developed collaboratively by parents and teachers, as well as any other service provider that may be working with the student. In the United States, it is mandatory that parents or legal guardians be invited to attend and actively participate in the IEP meeting. This study highlights the perceptions of collaboration regarding the

communication and equal involvement surrounding the development of the IEP, as seen from the perspectives of both the parents and teachers.

Statement of the Problem

In a diverse culture, there are many situations that pose challenges relating to the perception of and support for special education from those involved. This study gathered information from participants on the perception of collaboration regarding the Individualized Education Program (IEP) in the United States. To define the perception of collaboration, parents were asked questions relating to how they felt they were being heard by others in the IEP meetings and how they felt they were being perceived as equally valued within the educational team. Questions geared towards teachers were built on the foundation of how they perceive the action of collaboration from parents and were asked to give examples of good and bad perceptions of collaboration. In addition to the variable of collaboration, the variable of inclusion of parents (involvement before and during the IEP process) by the teachers was examined.

While the role of a parent and a teacher differ, the research shows that collaboration is the common aspect of support that is critical for students with disabilities. However, parents and teachers do not always agree about what constitutes true collaboration, with each side bringing their own preconceived notions. Collaboration is a hard concept to define universally. The definition of collaboration, according to Cook and Friend (2010) was the working definition used in this study, as it pertained directly to questions asked of both parents and teachers within the interviews. If parents and educators are not sharing key decisions regarding the IEP, the perception of collaboration can vary, and some may be more aware than others that this is not true collaboration.

In the U.S., communication between home and school has been a staple in special education for decades (Lavoie, 2008). As Reiman et al. (2010) point out, "Since 1975, active participation in all aspects of educational programming for students receiving special education services has been legally mandated" (p. 4). It is important to note that while being an active participant in the child's learning and communicating with the school are beneficial, these are not the same as collaboration.

There is a gap in the literature regarding teacher-parent collaboration in the United States, with a general lack of studies that showed a comparison between both parents and teachers within the same study and within a large-scale environment. Additional gaps in the research showed that there needs to be more active and/or better collaboration, such as suggested in the research by Adams, Harris, and Jones (2016), yet failed to offer even basic suggestions for improvement. The one exception found was in the research conducted by Jelas and Mohd (2014). One plan of action they called for was for public awareness to be strengthened through the media and educational and social institutions so that the acceptance of equality for all children could be achieved through this shift in a collective mindset.

The cultural background of all parties involved is an important factor that should not be ignored. If the special education teacher and parent/guardian are not from the same background, there may be instances where one participant agrees with the other, despite intentions (or lack thereof) of following through, based on their cultural understanding of partnerships (Voltz & Morrow, 1999). In addition, cultural differences can also include a lack of acceptance of special education needs, stigmas associated with having a child with special needs within a class system, and a lack of understanding between the two cultures represented by the teacher and the parent.

As noted in the study by Norwich (2009), "Identification establishes eligibility to recommendations and to civil rights protections of these adaptations but also can have negative aspects associated with stigma and devaluation that can lead to lower expectations for identified children" (p. 449). When presented with the information of challenges by the teacher, it can also be very difficult for these parents to accept and work with the teacher to begin supporting the student's needs or obtain requested testing.

Purpose and Significance of the Study

The purpose of the study was to determine if the collaboration efforts between teachers of students with special needs and parents of children with special needs in the United States are perceived in the same manner and/or by the same measures. This research aimed to explore the overall perceptions of collaboration between the school and the home, as well as suggested steps of desired training from both educators and parents on how to improve the collaboration surrounding communication and decision-making for students with special needs. The literature review completed by the Center for Appropriate Dispute Resolution in Special Education (2011) highlighted that “Specific training in communication skills and collaborative approaches should be a priority for teachers, administrators, and parents.” Throughout this study, the perceptions of both teachers and parents of students with special needs were analyzed to determine what level of collaboration they believed was occurring regarding the level of communication and shared decision-making within the IEP process, as well as the programming or training they felt would better enhance their collaboration efforts, particularly surrounding the Individualized Education Program (IEP).

Research Questions

This research sought to answer the following guiding questions:

1. How do parents perceive the Individualized Education Program (IEP) process for children with special needs?
2. How do parents perceive their involvement by the Individualized Education Program (IEP) team of teachers who provide an educational curriculum to children with special needs?
3. How do parents perceive the collaboration from the special education teachers regarding the Individualized Education Program (IEP)?
4. How do special education teachers perceive their efforts at fostering parental involvement regarding the Individualized Education Program (IEP)?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Educational Placements of Students with Special Needs

When considering collaboration among parents and teachers regarding a special education document, it must first be considered whether the educational environment is supportive of individuals with special needs. The current research review of the literature showed that not all schools in all countries require inclusion among their schools and therefore the aspect of inclusion is brought up in this research to provide a background of the mindset involved when providing support for students with special needs. While it is not required that a school be inclusive for a child to have an IEP (i.e.: private, specialized facilities exist that support students with special needs and are non-inclusive), in the review of the literature, the focus of collaboration regarding an IEP in learning environments was centered on public or private schools that accept all children, including those with special needs. For the purpose of this study, inclusion was to be referenced only with respect to educational placements of partial or full inclusion. Partial inclusion is defined as a form of integration where students with disabilities are able to participate in the general education classroom and/or various other settings for up to half of the school day (Dalien, 2020). Full inclusion is where students with disabilities are fully participating in the general education classroom and receiving the same educational instruction as their non-disabled peers for the entire day (Dalien, 2020).

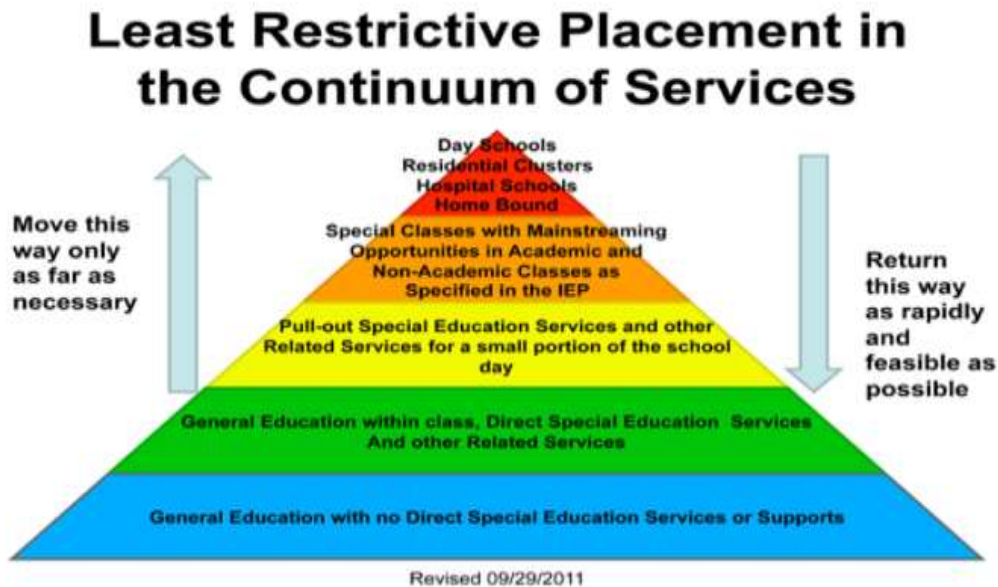


Figure 1. A visual continuum of the least restrictive placement options for students on IEPs (Smith, 2016).

There are discrepancies between what inclusive education really is across countries. Inclusive education is not segregated or integrated education, but rather equal educational opportunities. While inclusive education is seen as a goal of special education supporters, there is no law that mandates it must happen. In the United States, two federal laws oversee special education regulations within schools -IDEA and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act - but neither requires full inclusion: only that the school makes every effort to be fully inclusive, based on the least restrictive environment (WEAC, 2014).

Defining Teacher-Parent Collaboration: What are the Factors?

What does it mean to collaborate? As outlined in research by Collier, Keefe, & Hirrel (2015), collaboration requires partnership skills which include “family-centered beliefs, integrity, commitment, and professional communication”, all of which Collier et al. (2015) consider critical components of a teacher’s educational training. Accardo, Fox, & Shuff (2020) note in their research that many teachers in training do not have the opportunity to interact with parents and build these skills under a mentor and therefore, may be hesitant to work with families once employed due to their lack of training. By providing teacher candidates with the opportunity to interact with families more during their training programs, future teachers may be more prepared and more confident to reach out to parents in the future, which could increase collaboration efforts. Gamal Fayed (2011) noted in his research that for team collaboration to work effectively, both teachers and parents needed some development (or training) on how to work with one another.

Roles and Responsibilities of IEP Team Members

There are a number of persons that should be involved in the IEP creation and implementation, depending on the needs of the student. The roles of each member are equally important in the process and each team member has a certain level of responsibility to ensure that their input is given. Figure 2 provides defined outlines of the responsibilities of the individual team members as they relate to the IEP.

Required IEP Team Members	
IEP Team Member	Responsibilities
Student's parents: A biological parent, foster parent, legal guardian, or an individual who acts in place of the parent (e.g., grandparent, stepparent, other relative)	As full and equal IEP team members, parents should: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Actively participate in all discussions • Provide meaningful input into decisions regarding their child's IEP • Provide important information about priorities, the child's strengths and needs, as well as information about the cultural and developmental appropriateness of goals and intervention strategies
Special education teacher or special education provider (e.g., related service personnel): An educator with expertise about the disability and its impact on the student's developmental and educational progress	As an expert in specially designed instruction, accommodations, and modifications, the special education teacher: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides services outlined in the IEP • Ensures that student performance data are collected and analyzed, and then instruction and intervention are modified accordingly
General education teacher: A general educator who is, or will be, a teacher of the child	For student's participating in general education, this curriculum specialist: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides the core academic instruction • Implements required accommodation and modifications
Representative of the local educational agency (LEA): A designated representative of the LEA, often a special education director or coordinator, or a school principal	This LEA representative: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides or supervises the provision of the specially designed instruction • Contributes to the understanding of the general education curriculum • Presents information about the availability of the LEA's resources
Educational professional who can interpret the evaluation results (e.g., school psychologist): This role may be filled by any other member on the IEP team, with the exception of a student's parents	This individual: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explains the instructional implications of the evaluation results to the team • Interprets the instructional implications of the evaluation results

Figure 2. A table of the required IEP members and the responsibilities each holds. (IRIS Center, 2021).

When looking to create a partnership, it is important that knowledge is shared in an appropriate manner and equally, as able (Lavoie, 2008). Lavoie (2008) goes on to say:

In the teacher/parent partnership, it is important to remain mindful that both parties have areas of unique knowledge and skill. The parents are well versed in their child's long-term developmental history (physical, medical, and social), his interests and affinities, and his lifestyle. The teacher has knowledge of teaching and assessment strategies, school policies and procedures, and the child's school performance (p.6).

In the United States, this partnership is mandated. There are laws that prohibit schools from excluding parents (Lavoie, 2008). Under IDEA (2021), the parent is the first person to be invited to the meeting and a meeting must be held at a time suitable for the parent. With that said, being invited to attend and being invited to participate in a collaborative method may be two different things. To collaborate effectively, there should be mutual understanding and communication, as well as equal input and decision-making (Cook & Friend, 2010). Accordingly, the parent(s) and the teacher(s) should have equal say in the goals that are to be developed. The teacher should help to ensure the parent understands the roles that each must undertake in order to help the child reach success. When parents do not attend the IEP meetings, they are not part of the decision-making regarding their child's education.

Training Programs

To be successful in collaboration with one another, schools and families both need to feel as though they have the right strategies. Researchers Friend and Cook (2007) and Kampwirth (2003) wrote that in order for schools to be effectively inclusive in terms of supporting students with special needs within the school environment, it requires a combination of the teachers’ and parents’ knowledge (Table 1), as well as their skills applied to instructional strategies and assessment practices within the school.

Table 1

Parent and Teacher Knowledge and Skills

<i>Area of Expertise</i>	<i>Parent</i>	<i>Teacher</i>
Student/Child’s Present Level of Performance	Home-life ‘expert’ that can provide what the child is achieving at home and what strategies work within the home environment	School-life ‘expert’ that can provide the student’s current academic levels, behavioral gains or challenges, and what strategies are working in school
Medical History / Disability Diagnosis	Can offer a background of information that may be able to support the decisions for accommodations and/or modifications, knows medications being used, has a history of services offered	Has an understanding of the educational adaptations needed for the specific diagnosis of the student
Child Development	Knows the social and emotional developmental progress of the child, what struggles may exist, and how best to support them	Knows developmentally appropriate content to teach the student based on his/her developmental needs

Note. A table representing the skills that both parents and teachers bring to the IEP meeting.

In addition to the areas of expertise of the parent and teacher respectively, there are other areas where both the parent and educator need to work as a collaborative partnership in order to best support the child, such as communication and shared accountability for the goals, as noted by Cook and Friend (2010). If a child is having a rough start to the day, or is experiencing new challenges in behavior, notifying the teacher can allow the school to be prepared to support the student more effectively from the moment of arrival. Likewise, if a child encounters challenges during the day, it is helpful to notify the parents so that they may be prepared as well to support the transition back home.

METHODS

Methodology

A qualitative study, conducted by the principal investigator, was used for this research, based on interviews of both parents and teachers of children with varying disabilities from schools in the United States using a phenomenological design. The reasons for such a design included the consideration for participants to be in a natural environment; the

principal researcher could act as the main research tool; it allowed focus to remain on the descriptive answers; and it allowed for a holistic approach. Interviewing parents and teachers within the same study is significant, as it is necessary to be able to more easily compare the perceptions of one group to the other.

Limitations

These may have included not having full access to the desired participants, if participants do choose to complete the study and then change their mind, and using convenience sampling – which is not necessarily truly representative of the larger target population. It is imperative to note that defining the term “collaboration” was established as a foundation and that the actual interpretation among the participants could vary.

Definition of Key Terms

Throughout the research, many words were used to express an understanding of the study. There will also be acronyms used throughout. The following definitions and explained terminology will be beneficial for understanding the full report.

Collaboration. “A style professionals select to employ based on mutual goals; parity; shared responsibility for key decisions; shared accountability for outcomes; shared resources; and the development of trust, respect, and a sense of community” (Cook & Friend, 2010, p.3).

Confidentiality. Confidentiality is a condition of research in which no one except the principal investigator and/or researcher(s) knows the true identities of the participants in a study (Research Guides, n.d.).

Full Inclusion. A term meaning that all students, regardless of handicapping condition or severity, will be in a general education classroom or program at a full-time capacity. All additional related services would be taken to the child in that particular setting (WEAC, 2014).

Generalizability. The extent to which findings and conclusions from research conducted on a specific study, particular to groups or situations, can be applied to the population at large (Research Guides, n.d.).

IEP. This acronym stands for Individualized Education Program. An IEP is an Individualized Education Program that is prepared for each student eligible and receiving special education services (Farlex, 2021).

Inclusion (also referred to as Inclusive Education). The act or practice of including students with disabilities with the general student population; the act or practice of including and accommodating people who have historically been excluded [because of their race, gender, sexuality, or ability] (Merriam-Webster, 2021).

LRE. An acronym for the Least Restrictive Environment, stating that students with disabilities shall be educated with their chronologically aged peers as best possible (Bateman & Cline, 2017).

PWD. This acronym stands for a person/people with disabilities. For this study, a person with a disability is any student or adult who has a disability diagnosis that would make them eligible for special education services (Farlex, 2021).

FINDINGS

Trustworthiness of the Data

There was a significant level of transferability from this study, allowing replication to be made in other countries. As many other countries also have IEPs for students with special needs, the collaboration between the parents and teachers within those countries could be examined to extend the current research and literature further.

Several steps were taken to ensure that there was either little or no researcher or participant bias, including not allowing video access during the personal interviews, using random sampling to collect participants, and scripted

questions. When a new theme or topic emerged that was not addressed in the original questions, the principal investigator asked the participant to explain in more detail or to ask why she or he believed a particular statement to be true. These procedures lead to the conformability of the study.

Demographic Information on Participants

The study was completed by interviewing n=10 parents (data shown in Table 2) and n=10 teachers (data shown in Table 4) of students with special needs, all of whom live in the U.S., currently participate in an educational setting that supports students with special needs, and have children or students who have an Individualized Education Program (IEP).

Table 2

Parental Participation Demographic Data

Parent Code	Person Completing the Interview	Race/Ethnicity	Public or Private School Setting	State within the U.S. where enrolled	Disability/ Diagnosis of the Child
P02	Mother	Caucasian	Private	Pennsylvania	ASD
					Bipolar Disorder
					ADHD
					SPD
					ASD
					SLD (reading, writing, spelling)
					ADD/ADHD
					EFD
P04	Mother	Caucasian	Public	Texas	VPD
					SPD
P08	Mother	Caucasian	Public	Kansas	+++
P10	Mother	Human	Public	Wisconsin	Dyslexia (SLD)
P11	Mother	Caucasian	Public	Georgia	ASD
					Dysgraphia (Written Expression Disorder)
P15	Mother	Caucasian	Public	Florida	ASD
					ADHD
					Language delay

					Dysgraphia
					Dyslexia
					Autism
					ADHD
P17	Mother	Mix Race	Public	Kansas	Genetic Disorder
					Autism
P21	Mother	Caucasian	Public	Texas	Speech Disorder
					Speech Articulation Disorder
P26	Mother	Caucasian	Public	Virginia	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
P27	Mother	Caucasian	Public	Colorado	ADHD

Note. An explanation of acronyms for disabilities/diagnoses is provided in Table 3. Out of respect for the parents and children, the information provided for the disability was kept as listed in the original Google participation form.

Table 3

Acronym Codes for Disability/Diagnosis Provided in Intake Form

<i>Acronym Used</i>	<i>Disability Category/Diagnosis</i>
<i>(in alphabetical order)</i>	
+++	*Used to represent additional disabilities or diagnoses that were undisclosed
ADD	Attention Deficit Disorder
ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
APD	Auditory Processing Disorder
ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
EFD	Executive Functioning Disorder
ID	Intellectual Disabilities
OCD	Obsessive Compulsive Disorder
ODD	Oppositional Defiance Disorder
PTSD	Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
SLD	Specific Learning Disability
SPD	Sensory Processing Disorder
TS	Tourette Syndrome

VPD

Visual Processing Disorder

Note. Acronym codes for disability/diagnosis are listed in Table 2.

Table 4

Teacher Participation Demographic Data

Teacher Code	Race/ Ethnicity	State of Employment	Classes Taught
T01	Caucasian	Pennsylvania	Middle School Self Contained Emotional Support (all subjects)
T02	Caucasian	Pennsylvania	Special Education (ages 11 - 15 yrs)
T03	Caucasian	Pennsylvania	Emotional Support Grades 5 and 6 (all inclusive)
T05	Caucasian	South Carolina	Grade 8 Science (inclusion)
T06	Caucasian	Virginia	Employment & Transition Services Grades 9 through 12
T11	Caucasian	Ohio	Math and English Language Intervention Specialist
T12	Caucasian	Pennsylvania	K, 1, 2 Learning Support
T13	Caucasian	Illinois	Special Education Life Skills Grades 7 and 8
T14	Caucasian	Massachusetts	K to 1 Special Education- reading, writing, math, executive functioning
T16	Caucasian	Pennsylvania	Life Skills, Grades 6 through 8

Note. Teachers were not asked the same demographic questions as parents.

Findings

The study found several themes that emerged from both parents and teachers regarding collaboration surrounding the Individualized Education Program (IEP) process, which can be seen in Table 5.

Table 5

Emerging Themes from Parent and Teacher Interviews

Themes from Parent Interviews	Themes from Teacher Interviews
Frustration over school misdiagnosing or not testing for disability	Communication is key; establishing a relationship
Not trusting the school evaluations and seeking outside evaluations and/or an advocate or a lawyer to be heard in decisions	Discrepancies between different cultures and/or socioeconomic areas in terms of collaboration
Desire for more information on parental and child rights	Want parents to have a better understanding of their legal rights
Lack of common language in the IEP; too much educational jargon	Want parents to have a better understanding of the IEP

Note. The most common areas of discussion that arose from the interviews.

Research question 1. How do parents perceive the Individualized Education Program (IEP) process for children with special needs?

Six questions were used to prompt parents to discuss their experiences as they were related to Research Question 1. The questions were:

- Please tell me your thoughts on special education support in the public or private school your child attends?
- Did the school notify you of the need for an IEP or did you notify the school?
- How would you express your own feelings in terms of being prepared for IEP meetings?
- How much do you feel you are being heard by others in the IEP meeting?
- What workshops, training, or information regarding the creation of IEPs have you had as a special needs parent?
- Were they self-initiated or provided by the school?

Parental perceptions of the IEP - were they ready? When interviewing the parents, six of the 10 (60%) relayed that they were not prepared for the IEP process, had little to no understanding of it, and were unaware of how stressful they believed the IEP meeting could be. P8 mentioned that she took the necessary steps to be prepared, as it had to come from her own initiative, saying, "...School systems are not set up to want parents to understand their child's rights." P10 brought up how disparaging others were toward her because she was a young mother, at 18 years old. She went on to say, "...people would try to interfere with my ability to advocate for my children because I didn't warrant the kind of respect in their eyes that a parent normally would."

Only two parents (20%) said they felt good about the IEP meetings. P15 was the only parent to mention that the school gave her information ahead of time, such as a draft of the IEP. Despite that, P15 said, "...but usually, I don't really know what they're suggesting or anything until we actually get there to the IEP meeting." The parents' statements evidence a clear lack of collaboration. These data show that there need to be changes to the IEP meetings for parents to not only come prepared, but not to feel unnecessary stress about the situation in general.

Communication - are you simply being listened to or are you truly heard? When it comes to collaboration, all participants should have an opportunity to be heard equally. According to the interview data from the 10 parent participants, 70% of them said they did feel like they were being heard in the IEP meetings, but not all felt that the

attention was sincere on the school's part. P15 stated, "I'm being heard, but I feel like, honestly, they [school] do their own thing, you know." She conveyed that during the IEP meeting for placement, she disagreed, and the school listened, but ultimately she felt the school's decision was already made. P17 echoed similar sentiments when she said she only felt heard after getting a lawyer involved. Prior to that, P17 stated, "They don't listen at all. They have their own agenda and you can see it." P27 was also ambivalent about her belief that she is being heard, relaying, "I mean, they listened respectfully, like heard in the sense that they heard my words, but they didn't necessarily always want to do anything about what I thought." The data leads one to believe that while most parents feel they are being heard, it may just be a case of listening to the other person but not truly hearing what they want or need, leaving the collaboration less than desirable.

Research question 2. How do parents perceive their involvement in the Individualized Education Program (IEP) team of teachers who provide an educational curriculum to children with special needs?

Two questions were used to prompt parents to discuss their experiences as they related to Research Question 2. The questions were:

- What information did the school seek about your child's progress outside of the school environment?
- If none, what specific information do you feel the school should be aware of?

Desired information: what parents have received and what they want. It was important to know if training on IEPs could help parents be more prepared. Would it allow parents to feel they understood the process more effectively? Asking parents about the workshops, training, or information regarding the creation of IEPs they had as a special needs parents, and if they were self-initiated or provided by the school was important to the research. Of the 10 parents interviewed, only one (10%) stated the school or county the school was located in provided educational workshops that they were aware of. One parent (10%) said she and her husband were selected to participate in a parent education program through the school district due to the rare medical disabilities of her children. The remaining seven parents (70%) stated there was no training available and that they all had to self-initiate in order to learn more about their rights as parents and their child's educational rights.

When asked what workshops or training would be beneficial, six of the 10 parents (60%) mentioned wanting to know their parental rights, their child's rights, and what they, as parents, were legally allowed to ask for in meetings. P15 explained that in the IEP meeting, the teachers do try to explain things to the parents, but "...it still doesn't feel like it's user friendly, or should I say, like in common language for the parents to understand...a lot of time there's a lot of lingo going on." A particular theme that emerged from parents was a lack of common language used by the teachers. P26 mentioned being given information on the laws, but stated, "You don't have time to sit there and read this 90-page thing." If parents were given a simplified version that allowed them to access the most critical information more easily, they may feel that the school sees them as a co-equal in the process and that parents would have the knowledge needed to work together with teachers to make decisions.

Parental perceptions - are they feeling collaboratively involved? When asked how parents felt regarding their involvement, there was a high level of satisfaction. P2 said, "I'm pretty proud of how involved I am...And I think that overall, we do work really well collaboratively." P10 also had a positive experience, stating, "At this point, I am fairly confident in my involvement. I have a very strong level of involvement and I am heard, and my leadership is respected on the team." P21 went on to say, "I'm very involved, but I also make it a point to involve myself."

While many parents felt they were actively involved, not all interactions were positive. P8 expressed her feelings of being labeled as a problem if she expressed her concerns for her child. Both parents and teachers have different responsibilities that are specific to their role in the child's education. While these responsibilities are not the same, both parties should be equally involved when it comes to making the decisions that impact the education and future of the child. Parents were mixed in their perceptions of collaboration from the school with 50% thinking it was good and 50% thinking it was lacking or negative.

Research question 3. How do parents perceive the collaboration from the special education teachers regarding the Individualized Education Program (IEP)?

Parental perceptions of equal partnership: are teachers providing opportunities? Cook and Friend (2010) state that collaboration associated with special education services should not be a stand-alone aspect of collaboration from the school, but rather a part of the school's ethics and culture. Cook and Friend (2010) also state that collaboration is between parties, assumed to be equal, who work together in shared decision-making of a common goal. Parents were asked if they felt that they were considered equals. The data from the interviews showed that 50% of parents felt that the school valued them as equal partners and 50% of parents felt the school did not value them as an equal partner. And from the 50% that felt they were equal, two of those five (40%) stated that was not always the case.

Decision-making: who really makes the call? Of the 10 parents interviewed, only six (60%) felt they were being involved when it came to decisions about and within the IEP. If true collaboration, as defined throughout the study, was in place, this number would be higher, if not at 100 percent. There were many reasons given for why parents felt they were not part of the decision-making. For example, P15 stated during the interview that she is still in litigation with the school over the placement of her child in a self-contained classroom despite her refusal to agree. P27 went on to say:

I don't think I'm really being involved ... I was provided a draft and then prior to each meeting, I was asked to write like a description of what we were seeing with our child. But no, they [school] set the goals. And I had at one point tried to change the goals, but they didn't agree with them.

Although not one of the original questions, upon hearing parents mention points like that of P27, these responses led to additional probing about whether parents were included in setting goals, which represents the aspect of shared decision-making. Only two parents out of seven (28%) asked were able to say yes to that question.

Research question 4. How do special education teachers perceive their efforts at fostering parental involvement regarding the Individualized Education Program (IEP)?

Teacher questions related to Research Question 4 that were asked during the interview:

- How would you describe your collaboration with the parents throughout the school year?
 - Can you provide some examples of your collaboration methods?
- How would you describe the parents' collaboration with you, the special education teacher?
 - Can you provide some examples of what you felt was a good collaboration?
 - Can you provide some examples of what you felt was not a good collaboration?
- What workshops, training, or information regarding collaboration with parents and the creation of IEPs have you had as a special education teacher?
 - Were they offered by the school or did you search for these on your own?
- What additional workshops or information regarding collaboration with parents or IEP creation and implementation would be helpful for you as a special education teacher?

Teacher perceptions: communication is key. All 10 (100%) teachers interviewed

responded they communicate with parents using some form of communication (email, phone calls, texting, etc.) regarding collaboration efforts. The methods varied, but the sentiment was the same; keeping in contact with parents was important. Some examples of teachers' perceptions of collaboration that were shared include T2's statement:

In terms of my priorities...parents and families are really, really high priority. So for me, I make it a point from the jump to make sure that they understand not only am I an advocate, not only am I invested, but I'm someone that's accessible, you know, and someone that's open to conversation.

Examples of communication methods given included emails, phone calls, parent portals

to check grades, parent questionnaires, text messages, and direct contact during school drop-off/pick-up times. There were several words that emerged repetitively, including email, cell phone, accessible, and texts. While these methods do not align directly to Cook and Friend's (2010) definition, this is the perception of collaboration given from the teachers interviewed and does highlight the areas of trust, respect, and sense of community outlined in the collaboration definition of Cook and Friend (2010).

Teacher perceptions of parental collaboration: are efforts made?

While all teachers who participated believed their collaboration efforts to be reliable, the same was not reflected in the question about how they thought parents perceived the collaboration. Regarding parents in general, six of the 10 teachers (60%) thought parents had a good perception of collaboration. The other four teachers (40%) were more apprehensive about agreeing, stating it was inconsistent among the parents. Some of the more positive teacher responses included: "I think parents are appreciative of it - the collaboration aspect" (T6); "It depends on the parent for the most part. My parents are great collaborators" (T11); "They're [parents] usually really open and available..." (T12); and "I feel, especially with the kids I've been working with for multiple years at this point, the parents have become very comfortable and they feel very secure in our relationship" (T14). For the teachers who felt it truly depended on the parent and the given situation, some of the less positively experienced statements included: "There are parents that are very skeptical...They're either in denial or unsure that their child should be receiving special education...they see it more as like a label and not as a service..." (T3); and "...they [parents] don't want to collaborate. They just want us [teachers] to do what needs to be done" (T5).

With the change in the educational environments due to the Covid-19 pandemic, many teachers found themselves having to collaborate in new ways. T16 recalls how she created a "one-stop shop" of resources for her parents on Google Classroom that her students' families could access. It gave parents details on how to log into various applications the students used, resource links to other experts, and information about the school in general. She did not want her parents to have to look in more than one place, as things were already overwhelming for many. This shows a teacher who is establishing collaborative partnerships by sharing resources with parents that the teacher already has on hand and quick access to.

There are many reasons (and perceptions thereof) why people may not feel collaboration is at its best. During the interviews, there were a few mentions of certain demographics of parents that teachers felt put more or less effort into collaboration. For additional anonymity purposes, the contributing teachers are not identified in the following two quotes.

Teacher:

This is going to sound awful, but, yeah, I think white people tend to be a lot more about protecting your ego than others. And I've worked in very diverse districts. And I have to say, like, the hardest time with parents I've ever had is usually in majority white, affluent communities.

Teacher:

I mean, it's not, I wouldn't say it's super consistent, but over my twenty-one years of experience, I have seen that more often than not, parents on a lower socioeconomic scale tend to want school to take care of whatever issues there are with their student and kind of leave me [them] alone.

Culture, socioeconomic status, rural or urban divides - these could all be some of the many factors influencing collaboration between parents and teachers, or at least affecting the perception of collaboration between the two parties.

Desired information: what teachers have received and what they want. In order to have a better understanding if the teachers had a foundation for what effective collaboration was or what the IEP meeting should truly entail in terms of supporting parents, the question about training was asked. Of the 10 participating teachers, two teachers (20%) stated the school they were in offered training on IEPs and/or parent collaboration. Four teachers (40%) stated the school did offer training on IEPs, but not on collaboration or how to work with parents. Four teachers (40%) stated that their school offered no training in either area, IEPs or collaboration.

There were some mentions of what teachers felt they needed for themselves, such as "...being given clear direction or training on discussing the IEP with parents" (T14) and "...introducing the concept of what collaboration is...so many people have different definitions" (T6). Regarding the collaboration, T6 also pointed out it would be helpful to have a "common language" that would make working together in a more defined collaborative role possible. This connects back to the parents also wanting meetings that do not have so much educational jargon involved. There were a total of five (50%) teachers who mentioned wanting more training on the IEP process or development, either for themselves, or for the school as a whole.

Teachers gave examples of how parent training could help. T1 said, "I also think providing them [parents] with training, with dealing with behaviors in some of the [IEP] strategies that we use in class so they can, they can maybe carry over into the home. It's helpful." This highlights the shared accountability for outcomes related to the student's growth. T11 stated, "I think they [parents] need to have a short sheet. Have exactly what the law is and the processes." And T13 mentioned, "If they get to know their rights, to know that...if you don't have a real teacher, if they have a permanent sub in your classroom, that the IEP is not being met."

Implications, Recommendations, and Conclusions

The major findings included parental desire to know more information about their parental rights and their child's rights, as related to special education and the IEP. In addition, parental feedback showed that while they felt the schools were listening to what they had to say, parents did not truly feel they were being heard in the sense that what they had to say was taken into consideration for placement, goals, and accommodations within the school environment - in addition to the stress of meetings, feeling unprepared, and not knowing what to expect.

Parents felt that they were included in the IEP meetings (as mandated by law), but almost all expressed not having any say prior to the meeting, such as through a draft of the IEP being sent home or any communication with the teacher to prepare for the meeting. Parents felt the meetings were just to meet legal requirements and that the school had already made decisions on the IEP prior to the meeting and without the parents' feedback. While a limitation of the study was not providing the definition [of collaboration] prior to the interviews, it was assumed by the principal investigator that the idea of collaboration would reference some form of working together. From the data collected, parents do not feel collaboration is happening as effectively as it could be.

The teachers responded with more favorable perceptions of collaboration on their part, believing they work as a partner with the parents when it comes to making decisions that ultimately support the child/student with disabilities. With regards to how parents collaborated with the teachers, it was noted that they felt it was not a consistent process. Many teachers felt that parents do want to collaborate, but are missing key skills, such as understanding the IEP process or documentation, as well as their rights regarding the interactions they can have and the actions they may pursue.

Teachers also felt that they include parents in decisions regarding the IEP. Despite believing that they collaborate with parents, some teachers acknowledged that they do not send a draft of the IEP present levels of performance and goals home for parents to review and provide feedback ahead of time, which demonstrates a lack of sharing resources. If the IEP was shared, that could lead to more time to understand and prepare questions, leading to more effective meetings. Many teachers expressed that they want to advocate more for their parents and students, but felt torn between supporting the family and supporting the school, as recommending certain services might obligate the school to pay for such services. Cook and Friend (2010) highlight trust, respect, and a sense of community within their definition of collaboration. If teachers feel they must choose whom to support, there is a lack of community missing. This also shows the lack of trust teachers have for the administration to not cause adverse consequences if teachers support the parent and child. Teachers

demonstrated a strong desire for parents to have training so they were more informed and could therefore make decisions with the appropriate knowledge to support the decisions.

Implications and Recommendations

The implications of the results highlight a serious change that is needed within the school systems to promote equity for all students. Implications of professional development for teachers would benefit all parties involved in the IEP process, and with the data that exists, including this study, schools have an understanding of where to begin designing that type of training. The findings highlight the main areas that both parents and teachers feel they need to properly understand rights and IEP development, and how to effectively collaborate, respectively. The implications are clear and, with educational leaders who wish to move forward in the best possible way to support all students, the data show what needs to happen, providing training. To properly fund classrooms, provide training for teachers, and ensure there is adequate staffing requires government officials who will ensure the schools in their districts are receiving the proper funding needed to be successful. Only when all children receive equitable educational opportunities and all stakeholders are valued equally, and have access to shared resources, will the collaboration among families and schools thrive. Our future society depends on the education of today's children.

Global Implications

The current study could easily serve as a foundation for other countries to create a plan of action for particular training and/or develop resource materials for parents based on the information obtained from the current study. Additionally, using the data provided, other developing countries could create a procedural set of expectations and responsibilities of both parents and teachers that could outline the collaboration process to ensure that all members are working together to best support the child.

The findings that arose from the current study are consistent with the current literature, but they enhance the research by asking participants what exact training they feel they need in order to be more effective in collaboration with one another. The findings can be developed upon by schools to create more appropriate training for staff and parents alike, thus closing a gap that currently exists in the collaboration efforts and the understanding of the IEP for all participants.

One way that schools could enhance education for parents is to utilize technology applications. Using videos that are linked on the school website, parents could access the information and even have it available in subtitles of different languages. This would help for parents who do not have transportation or childcare that would make attending a training session possible. In addition, teachers could create the videos as part of ongoing professional development that would allow them to not only learn more about the rights of parents and children and the IEP process, but it would give parents a face of recognition as someone who is there to support the families and the students - someone they could build a relationship with.

For those teachers who are joining as new teachers, there should be mandatory training on collaboration, special education rights of the child and parents, and more thorough IEP training. Extremely helpful to the field of special education would be more hands-on training during the college coursework, such as working with a local special education teacher in a mentor capacity that could allow the student to collaborate on an IEP development, going through each step of the process.

CONCLUSION

This study was able to add to the literature available on perceptions of collaboration between parents of children with special needs and teachers of students with special needs regarding the Individualized Education Program (IEP). The importance of such a study is to not only continue the development in this particular field of research but to use the data to develop intervention strategies, such as training requested and desired by parents and teachers alike, regarding not only collaboration, but rights, responsibilities, and the development of an IEP as a whole. As seen in the data, parents and teachers are facing the same issues across the country. This study emerges as a stepping-stone for future educational

research and plans of action. With over 7.1 million students eligible for special education within the United States National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), (2020), it can be overwhelming for some educational environments to provide the correct information or support at all times.

Educators must pay more attention to parents by hearing their needs and concerns and working to remedy any situation in which the parent is uninformed, not engaged, and not being involved in making decisions that best support the developmental needs of their child. This study shows that there is a gap in the system that is not providing parents with easily accessible information and there is little effort by the school to change that.

With respect to the research that has been done and paved the way for a more widespread study, there is still one major concern - the evolution of research in this field has not led to a change in practice. Previous practice and current practice do not show a high level of parental support in terms of educational programming, training, or accessible resources. In addition, teachers continue to lack the educational training that will allow them to be successful in this vital area. Sing and Wong (2016) state that all teachers should have basic training on disabilities as part of their undergraduate training courses because if society is moving more towards inclusive education, all teachers need to be prepared and understand special needs students. Higher education institutions need to continue to increase the preparation of their students to cover all areas of teaching, including how to communicate and collaborate with parents.

As a society that continues to evolve and create new opportunities for learning and development, we as educators must continue to evolve as well and find new ways to educate one another, educate parents, and educate the community. We cannot expect parents to understand and be knowledgeable about every aspect of the education process. Educators must take the lead in developing programs to educate parents about special education processes and their rights as parents. Educators must make such programs available to parents and deliver them through a variety of modes. Educators are responsible for initiating communication with parents and maintaining it continuously. The education system must do all these things for one purpose alone - the success of the child.

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